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ABSTRACT

Social policy influences black wives' employment policies, regardless of occupation. The factors that influence a wife's working come from various social or societal levels--the individual, the family, and the wider society or environment. Individual characteristics supporting the black women's strong attachment to the world of work are her attitudes about and expectation for work, parent attitude, educational preparation, husband support, and black community support. Laws and social policy in America have detrimental influences on the working-wife family. No policy exists to reduce the high unemployment rate of black women, Social Security laws are no longer relevant, and no support exists in terms of child care. Child care is especially important because early care has a lasting influence, black families are comparatively larger, a larger proportion of black mothers work, and they are more attached to the work force. A dual perspective is desirable in achieving social change-- (1) acquainting policy makers, government officials, and wider society about differential influences of present social policy and need for more relevant social policy and (2) initiating necessary changes by blacks themselves. (YLB)

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SOCIAL POLICY AND BLACK WIVES' EMPLOYMENT

by

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American women, especially wives, have been entering the work force at an extraordinary pace. In 1976, for the first time in the history of women's employment, the modal husband-wife family contained a working wife. Eli Ginzberg, Chairman of the National Commission for Manpower policy, calls the flood of women into the work force "the single most outstanding phenomena of our century" (New York Times, September 12, 1976). Social scientists and researchers are continuing to explain this phenomena which contradicts the traditional American view that a wife's place is in the home.

As with most social phenomena, the recent influx of women into the work force does not accurately describe the situation for black families. Black women have traditionally worked outside the home. For example, in 1890 one-third (30%) of all working black women were married while only about one-seventh (13%) of all employed women were married (John Durand, 1949). The labor force participation rates of married women more clearly show the racial differences. In 1890 the proportion of black wives who worked was more than ten times as great as the proportion of white (22% vs. 2%). By 1975, the labor force rates for black wives had increased to 53% and to 44% for whites (A Statistical Portrait of Women in the U.S., 1976). Presently a larger proportion of black wives than white work but the difference between the races has considerably narrowed during the twentieth century.

The title of this workshop suggests I will discuss occupational outlooks. With your indulgence, I would like to expand the area and discuss influences of social policy on the black wives' employment opportunities, regardless of occupation. This does not suggest that occupations are not important, but

rather there are important larger forces which influence the occupational distribution and other labor force characteristics of the black working wife. If more attention is given to rectifying the problems of these larger forces, the intervening variables such as occupational distribution will improve.

Whether one looks at the occupational distribution, unemployment rate, income or any employment characteristic, the result is that black women are at the bottom level. Comparing black women to white women, one finds that black women are concentrated in fewer occupations and in the lower level occupations. In 1974 black women constituted only 12% of the female work force but composed over 50% of the service workers (1976 Statistical Abstract). While two-thirds of all white women were employed in white collar occupations, only two-fifths of black women were so employed (Statistical Portrait of Women in the U.S., 1976). Comparing the income of black men and women who worked full-time in 1975 shows that the average black women makes \$43 per work week less (1976 Statistic Abstracts).

The position of the black woman in the labor market suggests she is not receiving the support she needs for advancements in the labor force. There is lack of support for her entry into the labor force, her securing jobs for which she is qualified and for her functioning in her triple role of wife, mother and employee.

Conceptual Levels

The factors, whether supports or barriers, that influence a wife's working come from various social or societal levels. It may be helpful to distinguish at least three levels: the individual, the family and the wider society or environment. The individual level includes characteristics of the wife that support or inhibit her in securing employment. A woman's age,

education and attitudes about work are examples. For example, the greater a woman's educational or skill level, the more able she is to find a job and the more likely the job will provide personal satisfaction.

The family level includes characteristics of the black family as a unit and of the black community. Attitudes, beliefs, and behavior the family exhibits may support or interfere with a wife's employment. For example, in order for the wife to work, the family may reallocate roles and tasks, or change its standards in terms of household tasks. Older children and the husband may aid in what was the wife's duties. The family may decide vacuuming is necessary only once instead of twice a week. Neighbors in the black community may provide some services such as child care to the family.

The societal level includes characteristics of the wider society that are important to a wife's employment but over which she, her family and the black community have little direct control. The unemployment rate, unemployment compensation for pregnancy, availability of inexpensive mass transportation, and employer's attitudes are some examples.

These three levels of characteristics interact but are also distinct. The societal variables determine employment opportunities if jobs will be available and to whom. The family and individual characteristics determine if a particular wife will accept the employment available. For example, a woman may have the necessary education and skills for a particular type of employment, her family may make the necessary accommodations that allow her to work but the unemployment rate may be so high that she cannot find work. Or the employer may feel he has his quota of black women.

The present employment picture for black wives suggests they are receiving some support for their employment role. Let us look at the

present picture and the three conceptual levels to see from where this support comes.

In 1975 the majority (53%) of black husband-wife families had wives employed outside the home. This indicates that black women have a strong attachment to the labor force. Employment may provide self-actualization, status, prestige, an opportunity to interact with co-workers, or a feeling that she is contributing to the family well being. The economic effect is the most obvious result of the wife's employment. In most black families, the wife's income is less than one-third of the total family income. But it is often an important asset to the family (Hill, 1972). The wife's income often moves the family to a higher socio-economic level, permits a child to attend college or take music lessons, or is the deciding factor in the family's purchase of a home.

What are some of the individual characteristics that support the black woman's strong attachment to the world of work? The black woman's attitudes about and expectation for work are important. Black women expect to combine the role of wife, mother and worker. A study of college graduates showed black women are twice as likely as whites to have positive attitudes toward combining work and marriage (Joseph Fichter, no date).

Parents are often instrumental in instilling these attitudes in their daughters. How often we have heard parents say to the daughter "you must prepare to do something, you may not have the luxury of sitting at home." Historically, in southern families especially, the daughter was encouraged to prepare for a career by attending college. If there was a family decision concerning whether the daughter or son would attend college, the decision was often made in favor of the daughter in order to keep her out of "the white folk's kitchen." Today more occupations are available to black women

so that they do not have to choose between a profession requiring a college degree and a domestic position. The result is fewer black families have to make these delicate decisions concerning which child will receive a higher education.

The educational preparation, however, is still important to black women. Education is one area where black women have made major advancements. Since the mid-60's, there has been a sharp increase in the number enrolled at the college level. The number of black women under 35 years old who were enrolled in college increased four-fold between 1964 and 1974. Between 1960 and 1975 the proportion of young black women (25 to 29) who were high school graduates almost doubled (from 39% to 70%) (A Statistical Portrait of Women in the U.S., 1976). Black women not only expect to work, they are also preparing for employment through education.

Research suggests that black wives receive support for employment from husbands and the black community. Black husbands have more permissive attitudes toward their wives working than white husbands (Axelson, 1970; Scanzoni, 1971). Black men, compared to white, are more willing to make tentative, temporary, or long-range accommodations to the special needs of working wives. For instance, black men are more willing to stay at home with a sick child, to have a smaller family or to be amenable to the wife's absence from home overnight because of work requirements (Scanzoni, 1971). Black men, then, are more supportive to wives working in terms of attitudes and behavior.

Wives' employment also receives support from the black community. Black men and women peers view the working wife as a good wife, a good citizen, a loving mother, a woman who is efficient at household tasks. Further, the working wife is better liked by the black community than are

wives who stay at home (Helen Hacker, 1961). How often we see blacks assume a wife is working and ask "what do you do." The black woman who doesn't work is often embarrassed to say so for fear her peers will think she isn't helping with the family responsibilities.

The support the family of origin, the peers and the husband provide the black employed wife, unfortunately, does not indicate the black working woman has no concerns or family problems because of her employment. Juggling the many tasks necessary for the roles of wife, mother, and employee is a difficult responsibility. It sometimes causes family problems and family dissolution. This topic, while important, is beyond the scope of this paper. We do know, however, the support for wives working from the black family and community is important in helping the black wife resolve role conflicts and integrate the role of employee with her usual duties. When one considers the wider society, it appears that family and community support may be the only aid the working wife receives. That is, much of the social policy in America has detrimental influences on the working wife family. It is to that area that this paper now moves.

Social Policy

Laws and social policy should be neutral and relevant for all segments of society. That is, laws and social policy should not reinforce one family style over another, nor should they penalize a particular family living pattern or race. Sometimes it is the very act of meeting the standards of relevance and neutrality that results in laws' biased and differential consequences of the various segments of society. To accomplish relevance, for example, patterns and data for the entire American population may be used. To the extent that the information on all Americans does not capture patterns of societal segments which are distinct from the majority, social policy may

have unanticipated discriminatory effects.

In social situations, unlike in mathematics, the whole is often not equal to the sum of its parts, but rather the whole is a reflection of the patterns of the majority. For example, looking at the unemployment rate for all women suggests that the situation is not grave. In 1974 the unemployment rate for all women was about six percent; but the unemployment rate for black women was almost twice as great (11%). Policy makers may conclude that no social policy is needed to reduce unemployment for women. This decision may be understandable when all women are considered, but would be detrimental for black women. Actually since 1950 the unemployment rate for black wives has never been below 8% while the rates for white wives never exceeded 6% (A Statistical Portrait of Women in the U.S., 1976).

In addition to laws' relevance to all segments of society, law must also be relevant to the times in which they are enforced. The Social Security Laws, for example, were first instituted in the 1930's, an era in which the majority of both black and white wives were not in the labor force. One assumption underlying the Social Security Laws was that the wife was totally financially dependent upon her spouse. With the present labor force rates of wives of both races, the assumption of total financial dependence no longer reflects reality. Social policy and laws have not kept in tune with swift changes in the role of women in America.

America is not a homogenous society, but rather a complex multi-racial society. To be truly democratic, each segment of society should have equal access to society's benefits. To accomplish this goal both policy makers and citizens must be aware of the differential influences of social policy for various societal segments and work to make America truly democratic.

To insure that black wives continue to have a choice concerning employment in various and selected occupations, several laws require change. Time will not allow a discussion of each law and every social policy that has differential influences on black working wives and their families. The author will concentrate on child care as an example of the lack of support black working wives received from the wider society.

Child Care

Child care is an important concern to black families for several reasons. First, children are the future of black families. the care and development they receive in the formative years may have a lasting influence upon them.

Second, the average black family has more children than the average white family. In 1974, black married women in the child bearing years (15-44) had 2.7 children compared to 2.1 for white women (A Statistical Portrait of Women in the U.S., 1976). Third, a larger proportion of black mothers work than whites (1975; 56% Black, 44% White). Fourth, having children actually increases the probability that the black wife will work. The 1975 labor force participation for black mothers of preschool children was three points higher than the rate for women with no children. For whites, the rate for mothers of preschoolers was 10 points lower than for white wives with no children (A Statistical Portrait of Women in the U.S., 1976). Fifth, the black mother is more attached to the labor force than white mothers. If one looks at the employment pattern of black and white wives over the life cycle of women, one sees a pattern for black wives that is similar to black men. That is, their labor force activity steadily increases to middle age then begins to decline. The pattern of white wives forms a bimodal distribution. That is, white wives are more likely to work before children are born, to drop out of the labor force during the children's early years and to return when the children

are older or have left home (1970 Census, Employment Status and Work Experience).

What happens to the children of these working mothers? Katherine Dickinson's research suggest that in over half (52%) of the black families, child care is provided by relatives - spouses working split shifts, or other relatives residing in the home or elsewhere. This figure indicated the support the black nuclear and extended family provides the working mother. Of course, we cannot be sure of the quality of this care.

How does the wider society support the working mother in terms of child care? For the most part it doesn't. The income tax deductions for child care and the lack of child care facilities indicate society's negligence. The Revenue Act of 1971 greatly liberalized child care deductions effective January 1, 1972. Under this law, expenses for child care provided inside or outside the home may be deducted up to \$200 a month for one child under 15 years of age; \$300 for two children, and \$400 for three or more children. While the law seems as if it would be helpful to black families, there are some disclaimers in terms of who benefits. Married couples may claim the deduction only if both are employed on a full-time basis. In 1974 less than half (45 percent) of the black wives worked full time, year round. Thus, the majority of black families do not benefit from this tax deduction which in effect helps to offset the financial burden of child care.

A second disclaimer is that no deduction may be made for child care services of relatives and dependents living in the home of the taxpayer. In Dickinson study, in 38 percent of the black families, compared to 25 percent of white families, relatives other than the spouse provided child care. These families are not eligible for the tax deduction even if the wife works full time. The economically disadvantaged families, those with family incomes in the lowest quintile, were even more likely to use relatives for child care.

These families who are in most need of tax benefits are less likely to get them.

The personal income tax deductions have the effect of reinforcing families' use of child care arrangements provided by someone who is not a relative or someone outside of the home. Let us now turn to what child care provisions society provides outside the home. Day care centers are one arrangement. Day care centers provide for only 10% of all the pre-school children of working mothers. When one considers only licensed day care centers, the facts are even more distressing.

Wider society does not seem concerned about day care in spite of the fact that the labor force rates of black mothers of preschoolers increased 45% between 1965 and 1975 (whites by 71.8%) (A Statistical Portrait of Women in the U.S., 1976). This lack of concern was shown in 1976 when President Ford vetoed bill HR 9803 which would have provided additional federal funds for day care and raised the standards for day care personnel. This bill would have made day care more accessible by providing reasonably priced high quality service. A modified law, HR 12455 was, however, eventually passed. It provided \$240 million but postponed the applicability of personnel standards.

With more mothers of preschoolers working and the insufficient availability of day-care centers, part-time employment becomes more attractive. While part-time work allows the mother more time for child care and household duties, it is also an added financial burden. The part-time workers do not receive the same fringe benefits and wages even on a pro-rata basis, that the full-time worker obtains. A special Area Wage Survey, conducted in 1972, found that only one-half of the part-time employees received a pro-rated portion of the paid holidays and vacations that full-time workers were given.

Life and health insurance coverage was not usually provided; wage rates were also lower for part-time employees. The inequality in wages and benefits for part-time workers continue to exist in spite of the fact that the recent research shows two part-time employees sharing a position are more efficient and effective than one full-time employee (Dickson, 1976). The financial cost of part-time work may account for the fact that a larger proportion of black wives than white work full-time (27% vs. 33%). So far the wider society has not formulated laws to benefit the part-time employee.

In terms of children and working mothers, black families are in a Catch 22 situation. Black women may need to work to supplement family income due to the added financial burden which children impose on a family. In order to work, some provisions must be made for child care. The larger society, however, has not provided adequately for child care. So the family may accommodate to the lack of child care by the wife working part time or by having relatives provide the child care. If the families use these methods they lose tax and fringe benefits, thus making the wife's employment more costly to the family.

Strategies for Social Change

Women are an important economic factor in American society. They have responded to the societal demand for labor, especially in occupations which have been traditionally female. Valerie Oppenheimer has shown that the American economy could not have expanded to the extent it has in the twentieth century had it not been for women working (Oppenheimer, 1970). Working wives and mothers have been especially important in America's growth. In 1975 they accounted for almost two-thirds (62%) of the female labor force (1976 Statistical Abstracts). Black women subsidize America's growth by working in positions that other women would not take and receiving lower

pay than others in the same positions. The wider society has profited from black wives' employment but given little or none of the support necessary to adequately integrate the working role with the traditional roles of homemaker, wife and mother.

Child care is just one area in which society's lack of support for the black women is evident. Other social policy and laws have differential influences for the black family. One finds black women dealing with the dual burden of racism and sexism in almost every characteristic associated with employment. Rapid mass transportation, unemployment rates, unemployment compensation, maternity benefits, occupational structure, social security laws, personal income tax and wage rates are some other areas. In spite of these problems, black wives continue to work and black families continue to survive and progress. The survival and progress of black families would be much easier if there were greater support from the wider society.

The final portion of this paper discusses ways the black community may be instrumental in securing the needed social change. This social change will facilitate black wives' employment and at the same time protect blacks most prized possession - the children.

The author suggests a dual perspective in achieving social change. First there is a need to acquaint policy makers, government officials and the wider society about the differential influences of present social policy and the need for more relevant social policy. Secondly, blacks themselves must begin to make the necessary changes.

Research and policy analysis can play an active part in informing the wider society. Too often research studies consider the entire population instead of partitioning by race. Studying all individuals regardless of race or excluding blacks from investigation buries racial differences.

The result is that services and policies based on such research and policy analysis reflects white behavior and may not be appropriate for blacks.

Individuals as well as social scientists and researchers can be instrumental in informing policy makers of black concerns. All blacks must be more knowledgeable about political decisions and how they influence the black community. Greater involvement in the political process is a must. More communication with the Black Congressional Caucus and the state representatives is needed.

In 1974 a little over one-half (56%) of the black women were registered and only one-third voted in general elections (Statistical Portrait of Women in the U.S., 1976). The 1976 presidential election vividly indicated that the black vote can play a decisive part in an election. With two-thirds of the blacks voting, political parties saw they cannot afford to discount or minimize the black population. The political clout shown in the 1976 presidential election must be extended to state and local elections. Blacks cannot wait for politicians and policy makers to stumble upon the issues that are important to the black community. They must be ready with the issues and recommendations.

Blacks must prepare for the possibility that once the wider society is informed of their needs; it may not respond or that the political machinery may require too much time. In terms of percents and numbers, blacks and other ethnic minorities constitute a small part of the total population of America. Most politicians and policy makers attempt to please the masses or the majority of their constituents. If policy that would improve the plight of black Americans is seen as detrimental to the larger society, it may not be instituted or, if instituted, not enforced. We see this every day with the affirmative action mandates.

What, then, is the black community to do? They must find ways to institute the necessary changes. First, blacks can form coalitions with other segments in society who are experiencing the same problems. In terms of employment, for example, white wives are experiencing some of the same difficulty as blacks, but often the effect of policy is not as intense for whites. White working wives would also benefit from inexpensive, accessible, good day care. Working with other groups who share blacks concerns increases the political leverage and indicates the graveness and importance of the concerns. Policy makers are likely to listen to one-half of the American population than to one-tenth. Recent changes in the Social Security Laws are one example. As more white women moved into the work force, the sexist policy of a man having to prove economic dependency on his wife to draw on her benefits was abolished. This change, however, was beneficial to both black and white families.

A second and possibly more important method of instituting the needed changes is for the black community to initiate the necessary tasks themselves, instead of waiting for the larger society to act on its behalf. Historically blacks have accommodated to the void the larger society leaves and they can continue to do this. For example, blacks can plan their own day care centers and are doing so in some communities. Blacks can apply for demonstration grants or raise money from other sources for child care facilities.

Such a project could be helpful in several employment areas. Well planned community day care facilities, not just custodial care may allow more wives to seek employment because they could be certain their children would receive good care. Such centers would increase employment opportunities for the black community. It could also have a long term influence on job opportunities by having a training component. Individuals

interested in day care might receive training at this facility.

The two strategies - informing the wider society and initiating social change - are not mutually exclusive. Each can be used simultaneously. The social change required for some concerns may lend themselves more to one method than to another.

Work is an important activity for the black family. In the majority of black families the wife is employed. The accommodations of the family and the working pattern of black wives and mothers indicate a strong work ethic in the black community. The black community and the wider society must find ways to further support wives working while preserving the strength of the black family.

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